

photo by Master Sgt. Efrain Gonzalez

Senior Airman Jessica Perez checks data in the personnel folder of a senior noncommissioned officer. A personnel troop at the Air Force Personnel Center, she and co-workers review folders to ensure they have all the needed data before sending them for promotion board review.

AFPC:

AN EVOLUTION IN SUPPORT

AFPC does more than the assignment business, providing a personal touch to Airmen's careers

by 1st Lt. Megan A. Schafer

It's the center of excellence for personnel functions, but more importantly, the center where thousands of actions are processed daily to improve the lives and jobs of Airmen around the Air Force.

Over the last decade, the support provided by the Air Force Personnel Center has evolved to a new level of care. Despite its improvements in technology, customer service and overall quality processes, many Airmen still undervalue its role in their careers. But it's the center's function to track Airmen's jobs, and more importantly, their careers, on a seemingly seamless progression.

"We're about treating people the way you'd like to be treated," Maj. Gen. Tony Przybyslawski, AFPC commander, said. "Every Airman is important. Now, with improvements in technology, everyone has access to the personnel system. That's evolution."

Cradle to grave – and beyond

The mission: provide full-circle personal care to Airmen through diverse personnel functions.

People are the Air Force's most important resource. So personal care shouldn't just be visible during the assignment process, but from the moment Airmen enter the service until the point they decide to hang up the blue suit for good.

"It's not the personnel center you think it is," said the general. "I [assumed command] with a mindset of the personnel center being people randomly making decisions about assignments. But it didn't take long to

by Master Sgt. Efrain Gonzalez

Airman Basic Kyaw James leads fellow basic trainees in low crawls through the mud at the combat tactics course during Warrior Week training at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. From the second they enter the Air Force, Airmen receive personnel assistance, no matter where they work or deploy.

realize the wealth of programs and activities that have such great impact on every Airman in our Air Force.”

And it’s that mindset that the general wants to see changed — viewing the center as providing more than assignments.

“It’s a cradle-to-grave process,” the Chicago native said. The center supports you from your point of accession, through the many transitions you may have in your career — deployments, relocations, promotions, emergencies — to where you make a decision about your time in service — separation or retirement, he said. “And during retirement, we still are taking care of our people. There are thousands of military retirees and families of deceased Airmen that we continue to help and provide support.”

At the heart of this process are approximately 2,000 experts who diligently work to assist the more than 1.3 million customers they serve around the globe – active duty, civilians, military retirees and survivors. Their mindset is simple — take care of people.

“People are the ultimate weapon system. No matter how much money we spend on war fighting equipment, if you don’t have the human element to operate, maintain and employ the weapon, it’s a dud,” the general said in a recent news release. He views this cycle of support as the critical link to the warfighting effort.

The end result: an evolution in personnel functions and a change in Air Force mindset and culture.

Developing the force

The mission: apply a personal face to the assignment process by “developing the force, one Airman at a time.”

Force development isn’t a new phrase. It’s been tossed around the service for the last three years, but it’s only recently that the process has begun to take shape and affect Airmen.

The process will transform how the service trains, educates and assigns people to meet mission requirements and challenge. The beauty of it: It’s mostly transparent to the user. A great deal of legwork is done behind the scenes — personnel experts melding minds to transform careers.

“We’re constantly looking at your records, working to make your career a clear, deliberate, systematic roadmap,” General Przybyslawski said. “So as long as you’re in the Air Force, you have an expectation and you know through feedback where you’re going, what

opportunities are available, and what it takes to get you there.”

Force development teams are working not only with officers, but also with enlisted, Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve personnel, and civilians, taking a vested interest in each Airman’s career.

“It’s a growing process,” Col. Tim Cashdollar said. As the chief of the force management and analysis division, he’s seen the hard work that’s enabled this program to get off the ground. “We’re working from the top down to change the culture of the Air Force, and for individuals to understand their responsibility to provide inputs as well.”

The end result: interchangeability — giving Airmen the opportunity to development to the highest level they can.

Modernize and deploy

The mission: modernize personnel functions across the service to focus energy on the warfighting effort.

The Air Force’s legacy of employing cutting-edge technology to confront threats to our nation’s security has never been more evident than in recent conflicts, and for the personnel center, they too are leveraging technology to increase support to the warfighter.

“Our objective is to get the information available to you when you need it and where you need it,” Col. Greg Touhill said. As the director of personnel data systems at the center, he’s part of a coordinated effort to move many personnel transactions to user friendly processes — the “personnel services delivery” transfer.

PSD will shift many transactions from unit Military Personnel Flights to Web-based self-service processes, a contact center or face-to-face interactions.

“Our goal is to have 80 percent of personnel transactions available to you over the Web,” said the Franklin Park, Penn., native.

Imagine being able to access all your military records online from home or work computers, or process a performance report completely electronically. For the 22-year communications officer, one of few non-personnelists in the center, he brings a deeper understanding of using technology to improve service to Airmen.

“Some people say to put all the personnel business on the net isn’t rocket science. In my opinion, it’s harder than rocket science. That technology has been around for 100 years, and people still find it daunting,” the colonel said. “In contrast, the Internet and wide-spread computer networks are still young in maturity.

We’re already using Web-based services to do things better, faster, with less folks and for less cost. By putting our services on the Web, the personnel center is always open for our Airmen.”

For those personnel actions not online — the Air Force Contact Center is at your service.

In the 1990s, the contact center was established as the front-end response for the Virtual MPE. As technology advanced, more processes became available online, enabling the contact center to thrive as a 24/7 customer service production — providing expert personnel advice to family, civilians, Guard, Reserve, retirees and active duty members.

“We field thousands of queries each month through phone calls, e-mails, chat sessions or fax,” said Senior Master Sgt. Felipe Ortiz, the contact center superintendent. The El Paso, Texas, native said all types of questions come in, ranging from pay issues to award updates.

And as more personnel services are offered online, base Military Personnel Flights will reduce in size, making the contact center a critical link in the support chain.

“There is a place for everyone in the Air Force to go, one central location,” Jackie Holland said. The Aurora, Colo., native is one of many contractors at the center who pulls from years of prior experience as a uni-

Army Capt. Jennifer Finch (right) promotes her Airman sister, 1st Lt. Joy Param, to captain at Royal Air Force Mildenhall, England, via a video teleconference from Iraq. Personnel officials have helped accommodate many, sometimes unusual, promotion ceremonies.

by Capt. Heather Healy



But that's not all'folks ...

Force Shaping – The Air Force is balancing the checkbook and should be down to end strength at the end of this fiscal year. <http://www.afpc.randolph.af.mil/retsep/shape2.htm>

Air Force Missing Persons branch – The focal point for all information about unaccounted for personnel. Check out Page 11 in Airman's World for a feature on the program that acts as a liaison to family members of POW/MIA servicemembers. http://www.afpc.randolph.af.mil/powmia/mission_

National Security Personnel System – This new human resource system for DOD civilians will soon replace nine separate systems that previously governed civilians and is scheduled to launch this summer. <https://www.dpp.hq.af.mil/dpp/dppn/nsps/>

Personnel Readiness Center – Responsible for total force accountability in wartime and in crisis situations, the PRC tracked more than 50,000 personnel during the hurricane season that devastated the southeast coast. <http://www.afpc.randolph.af.mil/readiness/>

Exceptional Family Member Program/Humanitarian Deferment – Processes approximately 280 requests per month to move Airmen into assignments where suitable medical, educational or other resources are available to provide family relief or medical attention. <http://www.afpc.randolph.af.mil/efmp-humi/>

formed personnelist. Ms. Holland draws from 22 years of active duty experience to help her tackle even the most complex of military personnel issues.

But more important to her and her teammates is the way their customers are handled, with a personal touch.

“No one is ever turned away; each person is important to us,” she said. It's that personal service that's not only focused on getting the information to the

user, but also on educating them. “When we respond to folks, we don't just answer their questions, we also give them references, an opportunity to educate them and, in turn, for them to educate their peers.”

The end result: personal, timely, widespread access to personnel functions.

Zero defect support

The mission: Ensure a professional touch to the most personal situation — loss of an Airman.

“It's a job no one wants to do, but we realize how vital it is to our family members,” Maj. Yancey Cowen said. As the chief of casualty services, he works with a team of personnelists to provide “prompt reporting, dignified and humane notification, and efficient, thorough and compassionate assistance to family members.”

Handling 190 to 200 active duty notifications per year is a job at which they must excel. That includes making notifications to next of kin of deaths, and when accidents or mishaps cause serious injuries.

“It's a must-do, can't-fail system,” Col. Roger Corbin said. The Asheville, N.C., native serves as the director of the Force Operations Directorate that manages the casualty branch and is responsible for communicating the significant role the notification process plays in supporting the families of Airmen. “Our casualty branch is the operations center for all Air Force active duty casualties worldwide, a huge job, and one we can't afford to take lightly.”

To accomplish this, the 13-member branch operates 24/7, year-round, enabling them to begin the notification process as soon as a casualty is reported. From

the center, the staff monitors all details to ensure that units provide family members every level of support necessary.

And the casualty branch is always looking for ways to make the process more efficient. The start of the virtual record of emergency data sped up the process.

“Before vRED, we had to reach down to the bases to access member emergency information,” said Major Cowen. “We can now get the information in seconds. It's these moments when members have to understand the importance of accuracy. This ensures we can reach the families first, and we're able to send a professional Air Force representative to do the job right.”

The first obligation is to family members, everyone else is secondary.

“We support the warfighters by giving them a certain piece of mind,” Scott Hand said. The chief of casualty operations realizes that not every Airman thinks about that potential moment in time when they might be injured, but “our Airmen should know that if something ever happened to them, we're here and will do everything to support their family through the grieving process.”

The end result: providing personal care to our extended Air Force family — solidifying the significance of their support.

Beyond the call of duty

The mission: demonstrate to veterans the value of their personal sacrifice to serve.

Many of today's retiree population are haunted by disabilities from their uniformed years. Even worse, their retirements are reduced because of disability pay. That changed in 2003 when a provision was added to the National Defense Authorization Act — combat-related special compensation — allowing for retired veterans to receive payments for disabilities resulting from “combat-related” injuries, wounds and disease.

“The payments are tax-free, and can range from \$108 to \$2,500 per month,” said the chief of special compensation processing Kathleen Garfield. She's seen more than 14,200 applications processed since the program began, with more than \$137 million in compensation given to date.

“Many of these veterans have been fighting for this for years, and we're finally able to give it to them,” said the Wellsville, N.Y. native. Her name is one that's echoed around the Department of Defense community. Retirees are similarly familiar, specifically those with cases where the new benefit allowed them to do things they previously couldn't afford.

“I received a call from a spouse of a retiree who couldn't take care of her husband because of the nature of his disabilities. Now she can afford to hire in-home care to get her husband the medical attention he needs,” Ms. Garfield said.

And though the program has dispersed millions in benefits within its first 18 months, officials believe that education will help to reach many more veterans.

There are approximately 50,000 eligible Air Force veterans, and most of them don't even know the special compensation exists, said Col. Johnnie Seward, chief of the Physical Disability Division.

For today's Airmen, fighting in a war where a greater number of servicemembers are coming home injured, it's critical they document their injuries accurately.

“It's a good news story for our current veterans, and our Airmen — they're our future veterans,” Ms. Garfield said. Airmen can know that the Air Force continues to care for them past their uniform-wearing years and will continue to recognize their service and sacrifice.

The end result: bringing the personal care of the personnel center full circle.

The personnel center supports the veterans who served their country. Center workers ensure they provide disabled veterans the latest information. This helps them to apply for additional support and pay benefits for their combat related injuries.

Mary Andrews bids good-bye to her son, Master Sgt. Evander Earl Andrews, at a funeral ceremony for the fallen Airman at Arlington National Cemetery, Washington, D.C. The sergeant was Operation Enduring Freedom's first reported American casualty. Personnel officials help families reach closure when a loved one dies or is killed while serving in the Air Force.

by Master Sgt. Jim Varhegyi



by Master Sgt. Efrain Gonzalez

